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Women, Conservatism, and Social Welfare

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WOMEN, CONSERVATISM, AND SOCIAL WELFARE*

INTRODUCTION

The timing of this special issue is particularly fortunate, coming as it does during a period of reassessment and retrenchment in the women's movement. The attacks of the New Right, the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, and the growing maturity and sophistication of the women's movement, have spurred an intense reexamination and reanalysis of basic tenets and strategies. The articles in this special issue, although broadly diverse, reflect this effort to come to a deeper analysis of women's oppression and of effective ways to overcome it.

The importance of women's political activity is a common theme in these articles. From the initial struggle to gain access to the political sphere through suffrage to the successes of the 1970s, the main thrust of the women's movement in the United States has been to pursue equality in citizenship and legal rights within a framework of liberal democracy. Although the revolution in social relations that antisuffragists expected to result from woman's enfranchisement has not yet occurred, as Ehrenreich and Howard describe, conservatives and antifeminists still express many of the same fears and expectations of profound social change from liberal reforms. Eisenstein, in her essay on the defeat of the ERA, however, shows that these fears are groundless. She underscores the inadequacy of a strictly reformist approach to women's rights and the contradiction that, at the same time a liberal-reformist strategy is insufficient in its effects to achieve equality, it is radical in its potential to change the social relations between men and women.

Indeed, the fear of a radical restructuring of male-female relationships, as Ehrenreich points out, fueled the anti-feminist drive against the ERA. Suspecting that feminist promises of equality and independence for women were "so much pie in the sky", conservative women rallied to defend their traditional source of security: a wage-earning male required, at least in theory, to support them for life. Their intense and single-minded opposition to feminist proposals such as reproductive choice, equal employment opportunity, and the ERA, as Ehrenreich shows, was easily coopted by the New Right in a successful effort to create a political opposition to liberal feminism which did not exist in the early 1970s. In blaming feminists for encouraging male irresponsibility and threatening women's security within the family, the New Right found the powerful political ideology that helped to defeat the ERA.

The ease and rapidity with which the Reagan Administration struck down rights, entitlements, policies, and programs which women gained in the 1970s is evidence

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enough of the strength of the New Right and of the shortcomings of a strictly reformist approach. Abramovitz catalogues these losses and draws attention to their role in the conservative response to the current economic crisis. As a strategy not only to redistribute income away from the poor, among whom women and their children are disproportionately represented, but to weaken the political power of women and other oppressed and exploited groups, the Reagan Administration's policies seek to reverse the direction the state has taken since the New Deal. The development of the welfare state has not only politicized the struggle between workers and capitalists over wages and put both in direct contention with the state over health, education, and welfare benefits, but it has politicized the struggle between feminism and patriarchy by bringing such issues as economic support of women and children, equal educational and work-training opportunities, and child care into the political arena through state provision. To paraphrase Abramovitz, social policy is a women's issue.

According to the New Right, the fundamental issue is whether the traditional responsibilities of women to care for children and other dependents (such as the elderly), to meet the every day physical and emotional needs of men, and to buffer economic crises through their work in the home or labor force will continue to be fulfilled by individual women in families or whether they will be transferred, at least in part, to the state. The implications for women of this issue are clear. If women are to continue to meet their traditional responsibilities in the private sphere, they will have little opportunity to participate as equals in the male-dominated public sphere.

Ehrenreich, Abramovitz and Stoesz demonstrate the importance of the New Right's support of the traditional family to its political agenda. Nelson and Kahn further analyze how the women's movement has challenged the traditional power relationships of patriarchy and how the New Right, acting through conservative legislators and the Reagan Administration, has reacted by seeking to push women out of the public sphere and to restore traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity. Schirmer, however, shows that it is not <u>just</u> conservatives who support and defend patriarchal privilege. Even under a social democratic regime such as that in Denmark, women are manipulated through the very social policies which purport to help them. Subsidizing their availability as a cheap and flexible work force drawn into public labor or expelled from it through the expansion and contraction of day care, maternity leave, vocational training, and wage rates, the state is a partner of both patriarchy and capitalism. Acting as such it thus betrays the promise of equality for women through liberal reform.

Although many issues raised by the women's movement speak to the interests of all women, feminists need to be aware of the four-fold nature of social relations under capitalist patriarchy. Male members of the upper classes hold the most power in society and female members of the lower classes, the least. Thus upper-class men have, structurally, the most interest in preserving both capitalism and patriarchy and working class women, the most interest in opposing both. Upper-class women and working-class men are in an ambivalent position vis a vis either class or gender.

Upper-class women, for example, as Howard shows, may put class interest before gender interest. Only working class women, have an unambiguous interest in pressing women's demands. However, the emphasis of the women's movement on liberal reforms such as the ERA has failed to address their vital interests. It is only by directly addressing these interests and defending them against the assaults of conservatives on such issues as entitlement programs and abortion rights that the women's movement can present a broadly based, unambivalent demand for women's rights.

It is the very contradiction between the needs of capitalism and the needs of patriarchy, between women's power in reproductive labor and historically determined impotence in production, that needs to be exploited in order to overcome women's oppression. As Sable's analysis shows, even the New Right falls apart in confusion and dissension when it faces the real demand of women for safe and effective means of controlling their own reproductive powers. No longer willing to be kept "barefoot and pregnant," women of all classes are pressing for the freedom to choose motherhood, not to have it imposed on them. The women's movement must not let itself be divided by state policies which allow some women this choice while denying it to others.

Women, historically have also been united in their demand for the means to support and nourish their children once they are born. To have a truly free choice about motherhood women must know they will have the means to support their children and not be forced to decline motherhood out of economic necessity. Thus far, women's demands have only been seen as putting them in conflict with the needs of children. Framed in a context of free choice, however, these demands are actually consonant with the needs of children. Women and their children are poor; women and their children benefit from equal pay, good day care, and parental leave; women and their children have an interest in putting an end to violence in the family.

Although the women's movement may have underestimated the strength of patriarchy and the depth of resistance to change in women's roles, it has succeeded in bringing attention to the fundamental questions: In whose interest is state power to be used? What role are women to have in the public sphere? How are they to combine productive and reproductive labor so that men, women, and children all gain rather than lose from a change in women's roles? The pessimism of the New (and Old) Right about deeply rooted social change must be countered by the conviction of feminists that these changes are not only right and just, but good. New understanding and strategies for change are beginning to emerge. As Simon shows, women are developing their own way of organizing and of institutionalizing change to meet the specific challenges posed by their circumstances. This ability to create new forms shows the potential of the women's movement. The promise of uniting and transcending the oppositions of public and private, masculine and feminine, without hiding behind them or reducing women to pale imitations of men, is the strength of the women's movement.

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